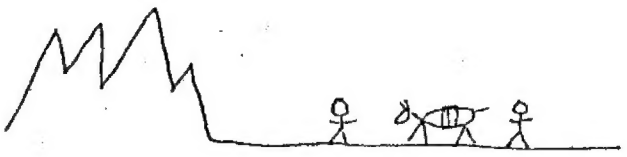
A TRIP THROUGH THE HIGH SIERRA

(along a portion of what was to be the John Muir Trail)

1916

by Arthur F. Fruhling



INTRODUCTION

When I was a very little girl in Vacaville my father undertook with a friend what was to be a rather strenuous journey in the Sierra along the proposed John Muir Trail the construction of which was being started. Only a few childhood memories remain of his later comments about that famous trip. I recall the stories of the burro's mishaps and, although abandoned at the end, Jennie was to be rescued by the Muir Trail crew; of Dad's scary and lucky experience on Mt. McClure; of his abhorrence for codfish; of his talking with the man at Tuolumne Meadows who advised against making the trip. This man was JosephLeConte of U.C., Berkeley, but whether father or son I do not know.

My family had the Reporter clippings of Dad's experiences but they became lost in the various changes that came about in my family in subsequent years. I have often wondered about them, and finally decided to search old Reporter files which I did last October, eventually finding his account at which I had to guess the date. It was impossible to make complete copies directly from the old Reporters, so I put together the several copies which had to be made and had them typed.

After re-reading the 65-year old saga I am impressed with the courage and perseverance of the 2 hikers, especially my father, as well as their foolhardiness and lack of experience! Anyone who has hiked and backpacked in high mountains will understand this. I know Dad did not know how to pack a burro using a proper hitch - this I observed when going with him years later. The two would have found better going in August, perhaps, when the snowpack had melted somewhat (1916 may have been a year of heavy snowfall, because I know that Vacaville had 6" of snow on New Years Day - a very unusual event); etc., etc. With all this speculation, however, there are matters to consider. The trip was planned ahead and Dad had maps and compass. In 1916 there were no freeze-dried foods, no down sleeping bags, no niceties for backpacking that we know today. No wonder that Dad got tired of codfish! The Tioga Road was the old, winding beautiful one that preceded our modern highway over which hundreds of vehicles now whiz along. Devil's Postpile is no longer "unknown to the outside world". The Muir Trail now is well built and too well-travelled.

Dad's original goal, Mt. Whitney, was still miles away when they had to abandon their plan. A few years later, Dad did climb Whitney with another friend, Samuel Terrill. Apparently this trip involved some adventures, too, since I dimly recall father talking about the rather notorious Harrison Pass; unfortunately, he did not write it up. He did write, however, Sam's and his names in the hut on Whitney's summit, there being no box with notebook then to record names. He told me to look for them the first time I went up Whitney, many years later, but I could not find them. There was nothing but a huge mound of ice in the hut.

I think people who have done the Muir Trail or, at least, parts of it will appreciate Dad's account the most. That does not mean, tho, that anyone will fail to miss his ability to cope or his deep love of nature's beauty.

I hope you all enjoy his story!

Clarion Fruehling

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VACAVILLE REPORTER, FRIDAY, AUGUST 25, 1916

A TRIP THROUGH THE HIGH SIERRAS

By Rev. A. F. Fruhling

In response to an urgent request, I shall endeavor to give a brief sketch of our trip from the Yosemite Valley to the Kings River Canyon, over the high Sierras. A friend by the name of Charlie Dyer of Los Gatos was my companion. A burro carried our pack, including food supply to last us two weeks.

We left the Yosemite just before noon on the 12th of July, bidding goodbye to the Boy Scouts of Vacaville (Troop No. 2). Before the sun set we reached Tenaya Lake, having lifted ourselves from 4,000 feet to 8,150 feet. The climb out of the canyon via Snow Creek trail was hot and steep, but once up it was delightful to walk through forests of pines and firs and cedars and see beds of shooting stars and groups of the snow plant in full bloom. Nowhere do the wild flowers grow so luxuriously and have such rich coloring as they do in these mountains. Tenaya Lake, about a mile long and half a mile wide, is surrounded by bare granite ridges, covered here and there with patches of snow. Its shores are either grass meadows or covered with tamarack pine (not a true tamarack, but the lodge-pole pine).

The next morning we resumed our journey and by noon we reached Soda Springs at Tuolumne Meadows. This distance we traveled over the Tioga road, which we found in excellent condition. All the way we saw nothing but tamarack. For a few miles all the trees were dead. It didn't look as though a fire had swept through then at any time. I was told at the springs that a certain beetle was killing off the trees very rapidly in this locality. Tuolumne Meadows, elevation from 8,500 feet to 9,500 feet, is about two miles wide and ten miles long, a charming place for camping, being surrounded with high ridges, from which shoot up peaks and pinnacles, beautiful and majestic in form.

ADVISED NOT TO UNDERTAKE THE TRIP

While eating our noon lunch a man on horseback drove up and engaged us in conversation. When we told him of our proposed trip, he strongly advised us not to attempt it, on the ground that the passes were in such condition as to make it nigh impossible to get over them. Not that there was more than a normal amount of snow, he said, but that the snow had melted and frozen over and over until it had become hardened and slippery. We thanked him for his advice, but determined to go on just the same. That afternoon we went up the Lyell Fork about six miles and made camp.

A THRILLING EXPERIENCE

When we reached the beginning of Donohue Pass the following morning, we unpacked the burro and tethered her and immediately started out to climb Mt. Lyell. We spent two hours exploring the pass to see how best to get the jackass over the hard places. At noon we started up the Lyell glacier. The snow being deeply ridged and softened by the norning's sun, we made rather slow progress. When we mounted the saddle between Lyell and McClure within a few hundred feet of their tops, the rocky ledges of McClure shooting up out of the snow looked more alluring to us than tame Lyell and so we decided to climb to the top of them. My friend reached the summit, but I did not. Within forty feet of the goal I had an experience which made me very willing to climb down in a hurry. The top of the ridge here is only a few feet wide. While holding on to a rock in an endeavor to swing myself from one foothold to another the rock gave way and went tumbling over a sheer drop hundreds of feet down. I just did manage to catch my balance in the nick of time.

McClure being about as high as Lyell (Lyell is 13,090 feet, McClure 13,000 feet), the surrounding view is an imposing one. The many high peaks about it and the great quantities of snow lying everywhere around enables one to gaze upon Alpine splendors. When we reached our camp at 6:30 we made

the startling discovery that our shoes were unfit for further travel. The snow-water had softened the leather and the rocks had torn it to shreds. The next day we reluctantly started back to Soda Springs, but not so the burro, for she was glad enough to escape Donohue Pass, over which she had been driven a few weeks before, coming from Silver Lake to Tenaya, five days without food. On our way down we stopped an hour to fish, catching thirty fine big trout.

WAITING FOR SUPPLIES

The first thing we did when we reached Desmond Service camp was to telephone to Yosemite village store for a pair of shoes and some leather half-soles. Although three pack-trains camp up, one on each of the following days, our shoes did not come because of somebody's neglect, and after phoning a riot act to the village store the order was sent up by special messenger. Our four days' delay were not entirely wasted, however. We went to Dog Lake and fished one day. A long string of twelve and fifteen-inch trout was the reward of our efforts. Not able to eat them all ourselves, we gave most of them away to various parties camped at Soda Springs. By so doing we made friends with two young men in a camp, who afterwards proved to be friends indeed. One of the two, a school teacher, kindly cobbled my shoes for me when the leather did come. The other, an artist, poet and merchant of Galt, cooked a bang-up mulligan and invited us over to it. The meal was a feast, not only of good food tastily cooked, but of ideas as well. When personality touches personality under such conditions the very depths of being are opened up.

CLIMBING MT. DANA

One evening at 7:30 we started out to climb Mt. Dana ten miles away and one mile above us. We took our blankets, but no food. After walking about six miles we spread our blankets and crawled under for the

night. Early in the morning we started to climb, reaching the top at 8:20. The view from Dana is more interesting than from Lyell. Eastward, the entire Mono basin is spread out like a huge map. The great Mono Lake, the White Mountains and the string of extinct volcanoes can keep a pair of eyes and a pair of field glasses busy for hours. Southward one can see the distant peaks of the Evolution Lake and Whitney groups. Westward, the Tuolumne Canyon directs one's focus upon the distant Hetch-Hetchy region. From Dana one can see the gigantic carvings of the glaciers during the ice age. We did not reach camp until 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Imagine our appetites after that twenty-mile trip and 5,000 foot climb without breakfast and dinner!

ANOTHER START FOR KINGS RIVER

On Thursday, July 20th, we started again on our journey southward towards Kings River, at the extraordinary hour of 8 o'clock at night. We went five miles in the dark before making camp. By 10 the next morning we were again at the foot of Lyell on Donohue Pass. By noon we reached the top, which is 11,000 feet. We spent the whole afternoon going down Rush creek, a distance of about three miles, so careful were we to lead the burro around the patches of snow. When we came to places where it was necessary to cross the snow we discovered that Jenny, the burro, could get over far better than we could ourselves. For long stretches we had to walk through water up to the ankles at times. The one scenic point of interest to us this day was Rodgers Peak to the southwest of us. We thought that Lyell and its surroundings was quite rugged, but Rodgers and its neighboring ridges looked like the turn edges of a wind-worn flag, opening up a scene of wild beauty such as we had never witnessed before.

THE MOST INTERESTING DAY

Our second was the most all-round satisfactory day of the entire

trip. We covered our greatest distance, we had no difficulties, and we saw many points of interest, diversified and extremely rare. Early in the morning we crossed a ridge and came to Thousand Island Lake. Banner Peak and its reflection in the lake made us forget all that we had seen previously. Just imagine miles of rocky ridges, sharp-edged and broken, shooting straight up into the air for over 3,000 feet, all but their upper parts buried under snow, then gaze upon two miles of placid blue water and in its depths see the same ridges and peaks facing downward! After leaving the lake we walked for ten miles along a canyon on a good trail 1,000 feet from its bottom. On the opposite side there arose before us Banner Peak, Mt. Ritter and the Minarets. Here we learned to appreciate the meaning of the word "sierra", which is the Spanish for "saw". Such saw-toothed mountains we had never seen. At Agnew Meadow we met a prospector who took our mail and gave us further direction. Early in the afternoon we entered a national monument little known to the outside world. It contains two points of interest. Devil Postpile is a great mass of volcanic rock thrown up in a singular way. The rock is arranged in huge piles of columns, each column octagonal in shape. Some groups of columns shot up perpendicularly and others lie horizontally, all so evenly arranged that it is hard to believe it was not placed there carefully by the hand of man. We came to Rainbow Falls just in time to see it covered with the late afternoon sun and transformed into rainbow splendor. The middle fork of the San Joaquin river drops over a precipice for 250 feet, forming Rainbow Falls, one of rare beauty. Late in the afternoon we descended into Crater Canyon and made camp along its creek.

MEET WITH A MISHAP

Little did we dream as we crossed a ridge next morning and took the trail for Fish Creek that our travel would soon be stopped for several days. Fish Creek flows through a deep narrow canyon, always a rushing

torrent carrying the snow waters from Cascade Valley down to the San Joaquin River. Where we had to ford it, the river divided into two channels. We managed to cross the first stream without mishap. While I was searching for the right place to cross the other my companion started the burro across. Her foot slipped on the rocks and she rolled over into the rushing waters, dumping our entire equipment into the stream. Fortunately for us two men and a lady in a camp close by on the other side came to our rescue. First of all we recovered our blankets and personal clothing. The men investigated the river and discovered that at the fork a dam of debris was preventing the water from going full measure into the first channel we crossed. Under their direction Charlie and I put on our bathing suits and shoes and began the work of removing the obstruction. For nearly three hours we worked in that icewater and finally reduced the water in the second channel sufficiently to enable us to go into it and search for our things. We recovered our cooking utensils, our fishing rods, our revolver and our maps, but the food and fourteen dozen exposures of film were gone! How we extricated ourselves out of this predicament, only to fall into others will be told in next week's Reporter.

VACAVILLE REPORTER, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1916.

(Continued from last week).

The nearest supply station from Fish creek is Mammoth, fifteen miles distant. Since the burro was in need of rest and food, I determined to go to Mammoth alone, much against the advice of our rescuers. I started out shortly after 5 o'clock in the afternoon. It soon became evident that much time would be lost hunting the trail, so I decided to go in a straight line to Mammoth Pass. After climbing the south slope of Fish creek, I came to the cliffs of Pumice Peak. It looked possible to make my way over and around them, but I soon discovered that a wall ten feet high was no easier

to scale than one fifty. But I kept on climbing, clinging to whatever I could for support. Once my pack of blankets struck against a rock and threw me out of balance. I grasped a half-inch edge of granite with the tips of my fingers in time to prevent a fall. Unable to move, however, I had to hold myself up with the fingers of one hand while I unstrapped the harness from my back and let the blankets fall free from me. Then, in some manner or other, I wormed myself over to a safe footing and climbed down about thirty feet to where my burden had fallen. I reached the top of the cliffs at 7 o'clock, only to face sloping sides covered with chapparel. Beyond the brush the mountain was but one huge pile of loose pumice dirt. I waded through it ankle deep until 8 o'clock, when a small bank of snow appeared through the growing darkness. A fairly level spot with wood close by, decided me to make my bed for the night. For two hours I sat by the fire eating snow and drinking melted snow. The map indicated that I had climbed 4,000 feet.

SIXTY POUNDS OF SUPPLIES

Less than one hour's walking the next morning brought me to the trail and by twenty minutes to ten I reached Mammoth station. By 10:30 I was ready for the return trip, with sixty pounds strapped to my back. From the station to the pass is a distance of five miles and a climb of 1,500 feet. It took me until 2 o'clock to make it. The pass being 11,000 feet and Fish creek 6,000 feet, with the trail in good condition, it seemed possible to reach camp by night. But after a few miles the trail ended and I had to make my way through the forests and over the slopes as best I could. Night found me still 3,000 feet above Fish creek, but seemingly close to it. I felt confident, however, that I could reach camp early in the morning. But a cow trail led me down the wrong canyon until it was impossible to go further on account of precipices. I had not the strength to climb back,

and to get around the ridge to the right canyon would take me through several miles of thick chapparel. I went through the brush --how, I do not know. Finding what once was a trail, I descended as best I could. Within a short distance from camp my companion met me. When we reached camp it was noon on Tuesday.

READY TO RESUME TRIP

By 3 o'clock we had eaten and packed everything on Jennie, ready to resume our trip. Some cattlemen having come down from Cascade valley, as they said, we decided to follow their tracks. Instead of crossing a ridge to the upper part of Fish creek, as does the trail on the map, their foot-prints took us up a tributary stream. At 9,500 feet we made camp for the night. Surely, the first thing in the morning we would descend into Cascade valley, but no -- up, up, led the tracks until we came to a divide, 11,000 feet high, and we found ourselves in the midst of a group of sharp-edged ridges.

Rather than go back, we decided to descend the other slope of the divide and make our way around to Vermillion Meadows. We were now off of our map. For two days we were guided by compass alone. Imagine our great relief when, at the end of our second day, we reached the Mono trail, within one mile of Vermillion valley! We had made a twenty-four mile de-tour over ridge after ridge, and through one forest after another, with only a compass to guide us, and we had not missed our objective point!

On Friday we made good time, crossing Deer creek to the South Fork of the San Joaquin river, following the latter to the junction of Piute creek. While passing through Lost valley, we came to a hot spring. Its waters flowed into a large tank hewn out of rock, over which was built a canvas roof. A Japanese man was bathing himself in the water. He told us that the water was just as hot in the winter as in the summer.

NOW FOR THE REAL HARD PART

On Saturday we came to the end of the trail and entered upon the beginning of the real hard part of the trip. Leaving behind us the rushing streams, the forests of pines and firs, and the flower-blooming meadows, we came to Evolution Lake and entered an altogether different world. Evolution Lake, over a mile in length and at an elevation of 11,400 feet, nestles at the base of Mt. Wallace, which towers to a height of 13,450 feet. Near by are a group of peaks, all of which are over 13,000 feet -- Haeckel, 13,124 feet; Darwin, 13,847 feet; Huxley, 13,427 feet; Fiske, 13,249 feet; Thompson, 13,495 feet; Winchell, 13,749 feet; Sill, 14,126 feet. The peaks themselves and the ridges which connect them are the sharpest and most jagged masses of rock I have ever seen cut the sky. Saw-toothed, indeed; mostly all teeth.

MIDST SNOW AND ICE

In the midst of such mountains we went from Evolution Lake to Lake Wanda. We had planned to camp here, but found a region of snow and ice and rock, the lake itself was frozen. We pressed on until we reached the crest of Muir Pass, 12,008 feet high. It took us three hours to go not more than three miles, but we thought that there would be less snow on the south slope of the pass. To our surprise and disappointment, it was completely snow-covered and the snow was deeply ridged. It took two hours more to lower ourselves 400 feet to Helen Lake, also frozen. By that time it had grown dark. We had no wood with which to build a fire and cook a meal nor a piece of earth on which to spread our blankets. That night we slept on a pile of broken rocks. A few dried peaches appeased our hunger somewhat.

Sunday morning dawned bright and crisp (it was 20 degrees); the morning sun not only increased the beauty of that arctic scene, but intensified the awesomeness of it. We were glad to turn our backs upon it.

Since leaving Evolution Lake we had no trail and there was none now. We' chose what seemed to be the only way out and started. Over the snow we went and down the rocks, but slowly, for the way was difficult. After going for four hours we came to where it seemed impossible to force ahead any further. While my companion rested, I examined the region about to the right and to the left. A duck (a pile of rocks to indicate a trail) sticking out of the snow in the distance to the left, led me to look beyond. On the other side of a small ridge the snow went down over 500 feet in less than half a mile. This must be our way down, for we were too exhausted to climb back over Muir Pass. The slope at the top was bout 60 degrees, so steep that the snow was not even furrowed. I started down. At once I lost my footing and shot downward with increasing momentum. To the side was rock, at the bottom was rock. Going down I noticed furrows in the snow about ten feet further over. While shooting down I stepped over to the ridges of snow and stopped myself in time to avoid going on the pile of rocks.

Then came the burro. She didn't slide, she toppled over and rolled down. Over and over she went until she rolled off the snow onto the rocks. We thought she was killed. After a moment she arose to her feet and waited for us. The burro's feet had made so many impressions in the snow that Charlie was able to hold his footing and managed to reach me without mishap, picking up the things that had been scattered along.

Fortunately for us right where we were standing on the rocks was the decayed trunk of a tree, the only wood for miles around. We made a fire, melted snow, and then prepared a meal-- our supper, our breakfast and our dinner. No meal ever tasted better, or gave more relief to two famished and tired out travelers.

But we were only half way down the slope. Charlie said we could not go down, but it was still our only way out. We put most of the duffle in the dunnage bag and let the bag slide. It went sailing down to the rocks,

where it was stopped. Then Jennie, without pack, was forced to start. She worked herself carefully down to the bag. Last of all, Charlie and I, each with a box, sat down in the snow crevices and gingerly let ourselves go. When we reached the rocks safely we felt as though a great burden had been lifted from us. By night we reached the junction of the LeConte canyon with that of the Middle Fork of the Kings river.

ON HALF RATIONS

On Monday morning we made good progress until we came to the mouth of Palisade creek at noon. I then discovered that I had lost my map! But only about twelve miles remained on it and I had studied it until I had it well in mind. Up the Palisades we went, past Deer Meadow, and made camp. Taking an inventory of our food supplies we discovered that with but half rations for meals we had enough for only two days more.

Following a line of ducks, the next morning, we soon climbed above the timber and re-entered the region of rock, ice and snow. The ducks only led us to a mining claim. Here we left Jennie and continued on to find a way out. We were now going between two crescent-shaped ridges that were about as sharp-toothed and perpendicular as those of the Evolution Lake group. We came to a series of lakes and followed their streams. That way ended in a cul-de-sac! We retraced our steps to the burro and back to Deer Meadows we went.

On account of our food getting scarce, we had to act at once. From Palisade creek to Simpson Meadow, down the Middle Fork of the Kings, was only a matter of eight miles, but the map marked no trail that way, and I had been told that it was impassible. But Charlie preferred to risk it rather than another attempt over the high mountains.

Accordingly, the next morning, we said "good-bye" to faithful Jennie and started on our way, each carrying a pack on his back, in which was but one more meal. We had not gone down the canyon more than an hour and a half

before we sighted a trail in the distance. Another hour brought us to it, and better still, to three men in charge of the construction crew of the Muir trail. Upon telling them of our situation, they directed us to a large cave in a rock, in which was stored flour, canned milk and canned beans, and they told us to help ourselves to enough for our trip to Kanoyer's camp in the Kings river canyon.

ONCE MORE ON A TRAIL

From here on we had a trail all the way. From Simpson's Meadows to Granite Pass we lifted ourselves 6,000 feet, and from there to Kings river we lowered ourselves another 6,000 feet. The Kings river canyon is rugged and wild and beautiful -- much larger than the Yosemite, but its walls are not so perpendicular and its charms are not so many and pronounced. There is only one Yosemite.

Our shoes badly worn and our time about up, we did not come out by way of Mt. Whitney and the Kern canyon, as we had planned, but walked to Hume instead, following the upper ridge of the Kings river canyon for twenty-four miles. Arriving at Hume Sunday noon, we left a two-weeks' growth of beard with the barber and ate a big chicken dinner at a hotel.

In the afternoon a jitney took us to General Grant Park. Here we camped for the night. We visited the grove of big trees and gazed upon the General Grant tree, which measures thirty-five feet through, the General Lee, the Fallen Monarch and many others. Only those who have seen them can appreciate them.

HOME, SWEET HOME

We left the park the following morning at 10 o'clock by auto stage. Down we went to the foothill region and hot valley country towards Sanger. From Sanger to Merced by jitney, from Merced to Niles by railroad, from Niles to San Jose by auto, from San Jose to Los Gatos by interurban and from Los Gatos up four miles into the Santa Cruz mountains on Shank's mare, reaching home and loved ones shortly after midnight.